

Cote 321

Chapter 321: A Heroic Deed

Kaoru had already reaped rewards equivalent to nearly a ten-pull from Horikita Suzune and Kushida Kikyo.

Now, Kiryūin would complete the final prize.

Noticing that she was unexpectedly cooperative, Kaoru seized the opportunity without hesitation, despite his lingering confusion.

Kiryūin had initially crossed her legs, her right foot effortlessly lifting just enough for Kaoru to slip off her shoe.

Now, only the silk-clad feet remained, devoid of any scent—as if he were holding a piece of warm jewels, its heat gently pulsing against his fingertips.

Not only were her delicate and slender calves encased in the stockings, but every inch of her thighs exuded an incredibly smooth and supple texture, without a trace of excess fat.

Her skin faintly revealed a wine-red hue beneath the sheer fabric.

The thin stockings were stretched taut, perfectly outlining the shape of her feet.

The skin of her instep peeked through, while her ankles glowed with a vivid rosy sheen.

Nestled within were several petite, pristine toes, neatly aligned as if waiting to be plucked.

It had to be said—Kiryūin legs had an excellent feel to them.

There was a sense of firm, athletic healthiness, unlike many girls who were simply soft and shapeless.

On the contrary, this kind of texture was even more enticing, making one want to play with them for a lifetime.

Kaoru lifted his gaze slightly, watching as the black stockings clung tightly to her thighs, trailing all the way up beneath her skirt.

A faint glimpse of her plump hip line was exposed due to her crossed legs, the stockings leading deeper into a mysterious space.

Kiryūin raised her leg, suddenly pulling her ankle from his grasp before lifting it high—as if the next moment, it would land squarely on Kaoru's face.

Yet, Kaoru didn't move an inch.

A flicker of hesitation flashed in Kiryūin eyes, followed by defiance.

She admitted that Kaoru's little game had piqued her interest, regardless of whether he truly wanted her to step on him or not.

The arrow was already nocked—she had to let it fly.

She wanted to see what Kaoru was really thinking.

Would he dodge? Or would he willingly accept it?

"Heh, for the sake of 700,000 Personal Points, I'll indulge my perverted junior's little fetish today."

With those words, Kiryūin stepped on Kaoru's face without hesitation—she was never one to be overly indecisive.

Since she couldn't figure it out, she simply stopped thinking and began enjoying the pleasure of tormenting Kaoru.

Because she held nothing back, Kaoru initially felt pain before quickly adapting to her pressure.

It was like a rough massage, every bit of it a sign of her excitement.

At the same time, Kaoru had a full view of the scenery beneath her fluttering skirt.

After all, she was still a beautiful young girl, just a year older.

Black lace.

A brief flicker of surprise passed through Kaoru's eyes, but upon second thought—if she dared to wear stockings like these, pairing them with such a design wasn't unexpected.

In fact, it made perfect sense.

"Why aren't you dodging?" Kiryūin found herself growing inexplicably excited.

"Is your fetish getting abused by girls?"

"Whether the one being tormented is me or you, it's all the same. What matters is how we feel—whether we're enjoying ourselves." Kaoru reached for Kiryūin feet, his fingers trailing from her ankle up to her calf—straight, slender, and perfect for a man's hands to savor.

With his movement, Kiryūin felt goosebumps rise all over her body.

This guy was absolutely a super pervert!

Still, she didn't regret it.

She was the one who decided to step on Kaoru—it wasn't like he forced her into it.

"You actually enjoy being trampled by girls? Mitoma, you're such a pervert. Does it really make you happy to be stepped on like this?" Kiryūin wiggled her feet, her tone turn cold.

"Why don't you try saying, 'Thank you very much for stepping on me'? That should excite you even more, right?"

As she spoke, she raised her leg again and stomped hard on Kaoru's forehead.

The force of her movement caused Kaoru to catch another glimpse beneath her skirt.

The girl's hips were remarkably full, yet her waist was slender and delicate.

Her long legs were sheathed in sheer stockings, faintly revealing the pale, tender skin beneath.

The stockings clung tightly to her skin, tracing an alluring silhouette that was impossible to look away from.

Because of this, Kaoru had never considered being trampled by a beautiful girl to be a shameful thing.

If anything, the one who should feel ashamed was the other party.

Kiryūin remained unaware of her wardrobe malfunction.

She was getting carried away—doing something like this in public was, for her, an act filled with thrill.

"What are you two doing?!"

At that moment, an enraged voice rang out from nearby. It sounded familiar.

Kaoru suddenly realized how compromising his position looked—his hands were gripping Kiryūin Fuka's calf while her foot remained planted on his face, as if he were desperately resisting her bullying.

"And who might you be?" Kiryūin asked irritably, clearly wanting to continue stepping on him.

However, the newcomer swiftly approached Kaoru, yanked him to his feet, and wrapped her arms around his.

The soft sensation of her touch immediately enveloped him.

"Bullying a classmate? The teachers said this warrants mandatory expulsion!"

"My, my, playing the hero, are we?" Kiryūin chuckled. "Do you have any proof that I was bullying Mitoma?"

"Are you seriously trying to deny it?"

Kaoru turned his head and was surprised to see Amikura Mako, her face filled with righteous indignation.

Why was she here?

He instinctively glanced around but didn't spot Ichinose Honami or the others.

Instead, Amikura Mako clung tightly to his arm.

"Mitoma-kun, don't be afraid! You have to stand up to people like her!"

Misinterpreting his hesitation as fear, Amikura cheered him on while glaring fiercely at Kiryūin Fuka.

In appearance alone, Kiryūin Fuka didn't resemble an ordinary girl at all—her aura was domineering and unconventional.

Combined with the earlier scene, Amikura had already mentally labeled her as a "delinquent" and "troublemaker."

"You know each other?" Kiryūin suddenly gave them a suggestive look.

"Rushing over in such a hurry—do you have feelings for Mitoma?"

Amikura's face flushed slightly.

She hadn't been thinking anything of the sort—the moment she saw Kaoru on his knees with Kiryūin stepping on him, her mind had gone blank.

By the time she regained her senses, she had already stormed over in a rage.

"What's it to you?" Amikura refused to back down.

"What's your name, and which class are you in?"

In many situations, calling someone out by name can create immense pressure—like a teacher spotting a truant student during patrol, or someone relentlessly pressuring you online to meet in person.

Even if they haven't done anything wrong, most people instinctively tense up, as if something terrible will happen the moment their name is spoken.

"Kiryuin from Class 2-B." Kiryūin showed no sign of fear.

If anything, she seemed faintly amused.

"An upperclassman?" Amikura Mako clearly froze for a moment before her expression turned icy again.

"Even if you're a senior, you can't bully a junior! Seniors should act like seniors—they ought to set an example!"

Japan is a society that places great emphasis on hierarchy.

Take, for example, the Takarazuka Revue, where juniors must promptly greet their seniors loudly and even bow in the direction their seniors leave.

Because of this, Tachibana Akane was always muttering about seniority, frequently scolding Kaoru for being rude—mainly because Kaoru showed her little respect and rarely used honorifics.

Though later on, it felt more like she was just looking for excuses to pick on him.

The fact that Amikura Mako could reprimand Kiryūin Fuka like this showed just how furious she was right now.

"My, my. So the day has come when I'm lectured by a junior. How unexpected."

Despite her words, Kiryūin Fuka didn't seem the least bit angry—if anything, she looked delighted.

"I don't know what conflict you have with Mitoma-kun, but you should apologize to him." Mako felt belittled, her tone growing sharper.

"As your senior, I'll offer you a piece of advice, dear junior. Before you understand the full story, it's best not to rush to take sides. You might regret it later." Kiryūin smiled faintly.

"Regardless, what you just did was too much!" Mako frowned.

Of course, she knew that logic, but when Kiryūin Fuka had literally stepped on Kaoru's face, what else was there to say?

Kaoru guiltily averted his gaze

. Thankfully, he no longer had a strong sense of shame—otherwise, every word from Mako would have been a knife, slicing open his chest.

"Mitoma, you're an interesting one. A bit of a pervert, sure, but you were right—I do feel better now." Kiryūin grinned slyly.

"Consider this your reward for today. I'll let your peeking slide for now."

Kaoru broke out in a cold sweat.

So she had noticed him looking!

Of course a girl would know exactly which movements might cause a wardrobe malfunction.

"Peeking?" Mako was stunned, a sinking feeling in her chest.

But Kiryūin slipped on her shoes, picked up her shopping bag, and stood from the bench, flashing Mako a smile.

"Seems you know nothing about his true nature. You're just ordinary classmates, right? If that's the case, why do you care so much?"

Mako watched her retreating figure, her thoughts in disarray.

Then she realized she was still clinging to Kaoru's arm and immediately let go.

Chapter 322: A Pervert Is a Pervert

"That was really harsh of her. So what if we're just classmates? If you see someone being bullied, are you just supposed to stand by and do nothing?" Mako stepped aside, her fingers unconsciously smoothing her hair and tucking it behind her ear.

Her high ponytail revealed the fair skin of her slender neck.

Dressed in her school uniform, she had added a jacket due to the cooling weather, wearing it neatly over a pale yellow shirt tied with a ribbon.

The collar of her shirt, patterned with diagonal checks, revealed a glimpse of delicate collarbone.

Her slightly full chest rose enticingly, while black knee-high socks hugged her slender calves, exposing the fair skin around her knees.

Between her thighs and the hem of her skirt lay an absolute territory, every inch of her skin radiating the youthful charm of her age—enough to make anyone's heart skip a beat.

At that moment, Kaoru noticed she was coming from the direction of the Keyaki Shopping Center, a faint sheen of sweat on her forehead.

If he focused, he could even catch a subtle, sweet fragrance drifting from her.

Some might assume a girl's scent was merely the result of cosmetics and perfumes, but there were exceptions—or perhaps Mako Amikura simply had a unique constitution.

It was easy to think of the phrase "fragrant sweat glistening" when near her.

"Did you just come back from the gym?" Kaoru asked awkwardly.

It wouldn't have been so bad if anyone else had seen her like this, but of all people, it had to be Mako.

Mako nodded, her expression turning slightly stiff as memories of their past surfaced.

"I really enjoy working out," she said. "Not only does it keep me fit, but after sweating so much, all I want is to rest. I fall asleep as soon as I hit the bed and don't wake up till morning."

"You're the first in the 100-meter race and in the three-legged race, right?" Kaoru recalled the scene in the festival.

"That's pretty impressive; even the girls from Class A couldn't catch up to you."

Amikura Mako was taken aback for a moment; it was surprising that he had been watching her compete.

Suddenly feeling nervous, her voice involuntarily rose a pitch.

"It's because everyone was cheering me on. If I couldn't do it... it just feels so embarrassing, so I had to..."

As she spoke, her voice trailed off, wondering if she was being too sensitive.

"That's still quite impressive," Kaoru repeated, then smiled. "Want to walk back together?"

Mako immediately wanted to nod, but thinking about their current awkward relationship, she hesitated for a moment, finally revealing a hint of girlish modesty as she nodded slightly.

The trees along the roadside rustled softly, and the hem of the girl's skirt fluttered gently.

Her fair, slender legs seemed to emit a soft glow.

From time to time, a few students passed by; even though they only glanced in their direction, Mako still felt a bit shy.

She suddenly realized that walking beside Kaoru was a particularly bad idea, as it might lead to unnecessary misunderstandings.

Just thinking about it made her anxious.

Stealing a glance at Kaoru, she saw his profile shining in the warm glow of dusk, his clear eyes resembling a deep blue sea, sometimes dim, sometimes bright, making one want to drown in them and then be rescued.

Long ago, a senior had also reached out to her, but afterward, that person had forgotten all about her, clearly not holding her in mind.

Initially, Mako had a similar impression of Kaoru, but his behavior was completely different.

Close yet distant.

"What happened earlier was a misunderstanding," Kaoru took the initiative to bring up the earlier incident.

Even if he hadn't said anything, Mako would have soon asked about it.

"Misunderstanding?" Mako frowned; she had witnessed the scene with her own eyes.

What kind of misunderstanding could lead Kiryūin Fuka to step on Kaoru's face?

Could it be that Kaoru had some dirt on Kiryuin?

Although they were only friends now, Mako couldn't help but feel worried.

She took a deep breath and seriously told Kaoru, "I'll be your witness. Let's report this to the school together. I can't stand seniors like her!"

Kaoru stopped in his tracks.

She seemed serious.

What should he do now?

'I'm sorry, I'm a pervert who likes to lick girls' jade feet.'

Admitting something like that outright felt like it would lead to inhumane treatment.

'I'm sick, and only a girls feet can cure my illness.'

Surely, no one would accept such a crude excuse.

Kaoru thought for a moment and briefly explained, "I gave Kiryuin-senpai 700,000 Personal Points, and in return, she deliberately stepped on me a few times."

"Huh?" Mako suddenly found herself unable to understand what he was saying.

She recognized every word, but why did it sound so weird?

"She thinks I want to pursue her, and rather than agree to date me, she thought it better to give me a little taste," Kaoru analyzed.

"Of course, she doesn't believe I would actually let her step on me. In fact, I don't mind such things; I could even reward her for it."

Mako felt her brain buzzing, thinking he was crazy, utterly perverted, and then wondered if he was being persecuted to the point of fabricating such a lie.

Various thoughts swirled in her mind, leaving her standing there, speechless and confused.

"Do you think I'm a pervert?" Kaoru noticed her thoughts and spoke up.

Mako, bewildered, replied, "Aren't you just joking?"

"I don't want to lie to you. Sometimes, people can be blinded by superficial glamour, whether it's me or you; it's best to be a bit more honest."

Kaoru appeared very candid.

If one were to overlook what he had said earlier, Mako might have found it quite agreeable; however, her thoughts were now in disarray.

"...So, it was your own request earlier?" Mako tried to understand his words.

In that instant, Kaoru sensed the girl's emotions—confusion, shock, anger, and fear.

"I'm sorry for not explaining the situation to you right away," Kaoru said calmly.

Mako was already struggling to comprehend.

Even if it was the truth, couldn't he at least tell a little lie to ease her mind?

Suddenly saying it like that, what kind of reaction did he expect from her?

It felt like something had shattered; her perception of Kaoru had fallen apart.

"Why?" Mako's face tightened; she didn't want to ask like this.

What if Kaoru was joking? Wouldn't that make her seem too serious?

Kaoru thought for a moment and replied, "If you saw a really cute kitten, would you want to pet it?"

"Uh, maybe?" Mako hesitated, unsure why he was steering the conversation this way.

"What if it was a stray cat and really dirty?" Kaoru continued to ask.

Mako imagined it for a moment and then said, "If it was a really fierce stray cat, I wouldn't dare to touch it. But if it was just dirty, I could accept that, though I'd wash my hands afterward."

"In that case, your mindset is similar to mine," Kaoru said. "To me, Kiryūin-senpai is like a cute kitten, so I can tolerate her being a bit dirty, even if she gets physical with me."

At this point, Kaoru turned his gaze to Mako.

"Similarly, you're a cute kitten too, so I don't want to hide anything from you."

Under his gaze, Mako's expression froze.

Chapter 323: I'm Jealous

Kaoru was well aware of the effect his words would have on Mako; a so-called "downstairs guy" could instantly douse a girl's passionate feelings.

Since he had already let her catch him, no matter how he tried to cover it up, she might not believe his lies.

It was better to be straightforward about being a lecher.

Mako was a good girl; until now, her life had been uneventful.

She had gone through kindergarten, elementary school, and middle school without any bullying, nor had she been a victim like Kushida, with a dark past.

Chie Hoshinomiya described her as a cheerful and lively girl who would help her classmates in times of trouble while also accepting help from them.

She usually enjoyed reading romance manga, often going shopping and playing with friends, embodying the youthful vitality of a high school girl, along with the small troubles that come with that stage of life.

When it came to her innocent and naive feelings towards the opposite sex, wanting to get closer but not daring to, these knots that couldn't be untied during the day would slowly dissipate at night.

However, that did not include anything lewd.

Mako had never seen anything inappropriate nor done anything bad.

If she knew that Kushida entertained herself privately, it would likely shatter her image of the little angel.

Although she understood that boys could be lewd and filled with strange thoughts, she could accept it because she might date, marry, and have children in the future.

Yet, Mako found herself unable to comprehend.

"Pervert!"

The girl blushed, and at a loss for words, she could only express her emotions this way, the most extreme insult she could think of at that moment.

"I think it's pretty perverted too, but then I thought, if both people like it, it doesn't seem shameful," Kaoru said, looking at the trees that were beginning to show autumn colors, the chilly breeze rippling the distant lake's surface.

"Pervert." Mako found it hard to believe, then realized something.

"Are you both like this? Is she your girlfriend?"

If it was a couple's game, she felt she had no right to criticize.

"Kiryūin-senpai is not my girlfriend; my girlfriend is someone else," Kaoru replied.

Mako's heart, which had just begun to settle, suddenly felt suspended again.

In just a few minutes, the information she received was overwhelming, making it hard for her to digest.

"You have a girlfriend?"

"Yes." Kaoru didn't mention Ichinose Honami or Karuizawa Kei's names; it would be too shocking for Mako.

Mako tightly pressed her lips together.

She wanted to force a smile, but it was impossible to smile at a time like this.

No matter how she tried, she couldn't manage it.

"You're terrible; you're so unfair to your girlfriend. I hope you tell her and apologize immediately."

The girl's expression was serious; no girl would like her boyfriend to be close to another girl, especially in such a manner.

After saying this, Mako took a step back, creating distance between them.

Her tense expression and stiff movements revealed her inner turmoil.

Under Kaoru's gaze, she quickly ran back to the dormitory.

...

[Extracting corresponding rewards...]

[Congratulations! You have received the reward—"Critical Hit Token"!]

["Critical Hit Token": Can be used on any target; after use, the corresponding reward will be doubled, with the multiplier randomly drawn from 0.01% to 100%.]

...

[Congratulations! You have received the reward—"Black-framed Glasses"!]

["Black-framed Glasses": Said to be a disguise tool used by Superman; when worn, those around you will subconsciously disregard your original identity and accept your fabricated new identity.]

...

[Congratulations! You have received the reward—"Saeki Chazuki's Bathing Photo"]

[Congratulations! You have received the reward—"1% Shares of the Shinomiya Financial Group"]

[Congratulations! You have received the reward—"Raising Manual"]

...

[All rewards have been distributed; please check!]

New rewards had arrived, but Kaoru did not rush to check their status.

Although the "Critical Hit Token" sounded interesting, it was likely a coveted artifact for many gamblers.

A week after the sports festival, the student council's handover ceremony finally arrived.

On the podium in the gym, Horikita Manabu, as the student council president, delivered his final remarks to all students and teachers, briefly reflecting on his past before quickly concluding his farewell speech.

Next, under the host's guidance, the new student council president, Nagumo Miyabi, walked slowly to the front with what he considered an extremely elegant stride.

Kaoru, as the vice president, stood in the back of the student council line and couldn't see Nagumo's expression, but he could somewhat imagine the other's flamboyance and pride.

Sure enough, as soon as Nagumo finished his self-introduction, he forcefully announced that he would push for school reforms, starting with making the student council's term indefinite, abolishing the general election system, and removing the limit on the number of members.

If any council member was irresponsible or lacked ability, he would immediately dismiss them.

From this fierce declaration, one could already glimpse what Nagumo's so-called reforms entailed, and people like Kiriya Ikuyo listened with serious expressions.

Meanwhile, the students in the audience, with third-years about to graduate, were indifferent; the second-years looked tense and the first-years were still unclear about their upcoming fate.

After the ceremony, Tachibana Akane looked at Kaoru with a hint of sadness.

"Without me, you can't slack off, Mitoma-kun; the student council office isn't a place for you to sleep."

"Why don't you come back and supervise me?" Kaoru was too lazy to refute her accusation.

"How could that be? You really think you can't work hard without me?" Akane felt a little happy inside, not expecting Kaoru to share her thoughts.

She had been worried that after her resignation, she wouldn't have many opportunities to see him.

"Absolutely not; I don't want to take care of you every day."

Kaoru was momentarily speechless.

When had she ever taken care of him?

"Hey, hey, hey, I'm resigning today; don't you have anything to say?" Akane actually enjoyed being with him, feeling she could vent any frustrations without any reservations.

"Shouldn't it be the senpai treating the kouhai?"

"How rude! It's always the kouhai treating the senpai to food!"

"This is the first time I've seen such a thick-skinned senpai."

"That's because you're too stingy!"

"Because it makes it seem like senpai can be easily satisfied with food."

"What do you mean by that?"

Before long, Akane bumped her head against Kaoru's again, surprising him with how such a petite figure could act like a little pig.

"Tachibana-senpai, I heard there's a place where the Rossini steak is particularly delicious," Ichinose Honami chimed in, leaning closer to Akane and lowering her voice.

"Want to go eat together?"

Akane was tempted and instinctively glanced at Kaoru, a hint of modesty flashing in her eyes.

'Hmph,' now she understood; 'this was how a kouhai should behave towards a senpai.'

"Since it's an invitation from Ichinose, of course, it's fine, but you don't need to treat; I'm not stingy."

It felt like she was hinting at something.

Kaoru thought for a moment and called out to Horikita Manabu, who was not far away.

"Horikita-senpai, do you want to join us for a meal? Tachibana-senpai and the others have a good..."

He was halfway through when Akane sensed something was off, her face turning red as she quickly covered his lips, looking a bit flustered.

Horikita turned back in confusion, just catching sight of their posture, unable to comprehend, but he nodded as if to acknowledge them.

Noticing that Horikita wasn't paying attention to them, Akane let out a sigh of relief and shot Kaoru a fierce glare.

"If you say another word, I'll kill you!"

The girl's small hand was soft and fragrant, and Kaoru licked her palm.

"Whoa!" Akane quickly withdrew her hand, feeling sticky in her palm, her eyes filled with anger.

This guy was really rude to his senpai!

"Isn't it good for Horikita-senpai to come along with us?" Kaoru showed no reaction; it was just a lick, after all.

"I don't need your help, I have my own rhythm!" Tachibana Akane stubbornly retorted, though in truth she hadn't even considered inviting Horikita Manabu earlier.

Her mind had been preoccupied with thoughts of making Kaoru beg her, so when she heard his voice, her brain momentarily went blank.

As she spoke, Akane wiped her hand vigorously on his clothes, visibly disgusted by his saliva.

"Disgusting, so disgusting, utterly revolting!"

Kaoru laughed in exasperation.

When she bit or headbutted him, why didn't she find that disgusting?

However, before he could react, Akane predictably bolted away like she'd anticipated his move.

The girl's skirt fluttered up, revealing a generous portion of her snow-white thigh.

"Tachibana-senpai is adorable. Even I quite like her," Ichinose Honami remarked from the side, a faint smile gracing her features.

To others, this might have seemed like a dangerous signal, but Kaoru knew she genuinely felt that way.

"Wait till she bites you, then you'll understand how I feel," Kaoru dismissed, knowing full well the little senpai had little fangs that made her bites particularly painful.

"Oh no, because Tachibana-senpai only acts like that with you." Honami found the situation somewhat amusing herself.

"I've always been curious—how did you two become so close?"

"If you're asking me, who should I ask?" Kaoru was equally puzzled.

From start to finish, he'd never done anything special to Akane—if anything, she'd looked down on him first.

If he had to pinpoint a turning point, it probably began when he openly acknowledged Akane's secret crush.

After that, it was as if they shared a secret.

Akane would sometimes complain to him about Horikita Manabu's obliviousness and virtues.

Of course, whenever pressed to take action, Akane could instantly conjure a hundred excuses, even feigning death to avoid the situation.

Perhaps after too many evasions, she gradually stopped mentioning Horikita's name altogether, instead growing increasingly fond of antagonizing Kaoru.

"Maybe it's because I know her secret?" Kaoru habitually asked, "Are you jealous by any chance?"

He expected Honami to deny it as usual, but to his surprise, she nodded straightforwardly.

"That's right, I'm very jealous right now."

Chapter 324: The Shuffle Exam

"In your eyes, shouldn't I be jealous?"

As the ceremony concluded, the crowd gradually dispersed.

With classes still ahead, students began making their way toward the academic buildings.

Walking along the path, Ichinose clasped her hands behind her back.

"I can't really tell. Maybe you could remind me directly next time," Kaoru said as he walked beside her.

Their conversations during these walks were usually brief.

"Wouldn't that make me seem like an overly clingy woman?" Ichinose sighed softly.

"With so many girls around you, when will my jealousy ever end?"

As she spoke, her eyelids drooped slightly, revealing a trace of melancholy.

A shadow fleetingly crossed her lovely face.

"I'm sorry. I'm not a good boyfriend," Kaoru said, observing her expression.

"As your first love, I should have given you a better romantic experience."

Ichinose murmured, "Have you ever been in love before?"

Kaoru hesitated for a moment before answering, "I don't know how to respond to that. A proper relationship... I don't think I've ever had one. Though I've had plenty of... less proper partners."

"Less proper partners?" Ichinose's mind immediately wandered to inappropriate places, her cheeks flushing slightly as she imagined Kaoru groping some girl's chest.

Truthfully, her imagination wasn't far off.

"This is too much. You're my first love, my first kiss," Ichinose said, lightly tapping her lips with a finger, her eyes showing dissatisfaction.

"I feel like I'm at such a disadvantage. What else is still your first?"

This question stumped Kaoru.

"Never mind, I won't dwell on it. What's past is past, and no one can change it. What matters is now."

A seemingly carefree smile appeared on Ichinose's face, but neither Kaoru's sharp eyes nor his Emotion Perception missed the underlying emotions—unease, worry, reluctance, and pain.

"No, the present can change the past," Kaoru said, looking away from her.

"Just like when I threatened you before. If we could have a better way of meeting, would you want to change it?"

Ichinose suddenly froze, her eyes shimmering as she pressed her lips tightly together.

This guy thought she was still troubled by that dark history.

Though their current relationship was good and she felt comfortable around Kaoru, there was always a thorn in her heart that ached faintly.

About that incident, she didn't know whether to thank Kaoru or resent him—because their connection had begun with an imperfect encounter.

"It can't be changed, can it?" Ichinose forced a smile. "Besides, I don't care about it anymore."

"Let's try, then?" Kaoru ignored her stubbornness.

That thorn had to be removed, or it would affect their future relationship too much.

Ichinose had initially intended to refuse, but seeing his serious expression, she found herself nodding inexplicably.

"Fine. Let's start dating this month."

"Wha—d-d-d-d-dating!?"

"Keep your voice down."

"Dating?"

"Dating."

...

After the student council elections, midterms arrived soon after, and the school's promised point rewards finally came into play.

Strangely, nothing unusual happened during these midterms—they were even slightly easier than usual, leaving many students who had expected a special exam worrying for nothing.

"The class average is 85. Everyone passed. You've all safely made it through midterms," came Mashima Tomonari's slightly indifferent voice from the podium.

Class A students were already accustomed to their homeroom teacher's style—always summarizing things in the simplest terms.

"I won't elaborate on these results. I'm sure you've already sensed something about the school's special exams." Mashima paused.

"Why were the point rewards used for midterms? Why weren't the midterms a special exam?"

"Mashima-sensei, I heard the special exam for the upperclassmen has already begun." Sakayanagi Arisu smiled faintly.

The rewards each grade received from the sports festival were identical, meaning the special exams across grades now shared similarities.

"You're quite well-informed." Mashima glanced at her. "Around this time in previous years, first-years would have an academic showdown. Though the questions differed, upperclassmen also experienced similar competitions in their time."

"Could you explain the specifics?" Katsuragi Kouhei asked solemnly.

"There will be a quiz based on the final exam content next week, which I assume you're already aware of," Mashima said. "First, just like last semester, this quiz won't affect your grades no matter how you perform. You're free to approach it however you wish."

Several students grimaced.

They'd heard similar reassurances before, only to nearly fail the midterms.

"As you've probably guessed, this final exam is officially called the Paper Shuffle. Based on the quiz results, the school will pair each of you with a classmate to form two-person teams."

Under Mashima's explanation, Class A quickly grasped the rules of this paired exam.

Essentially, two students would form a team to tackle the finals together.

There were eight subjects, each with a perfect score of 100 points and fifty questions, totaling four hundred questions.

Each subject had a minimum passing score.

If any student scored below sixty, both they and their partner would face mandatory expulsion.

However, this sixty-point threshold referred to the combined scores of both students.

Meaning if each scored thirty, their total would be sixty, thus avoiding expulsion.

But that wasn't all.

"This year's Paper Shuffle has an additional requirement. Even if you surpass the passing score in every subject, failing to meet the total score standard will still result in expulsion." Mashima's tone grew particularly stern.

"The total score is also based on the pair's combined results. Based on previous years, you'll need at least seven hundred points for safety."

"Seven hundred?!" Some academically weaker students began to panic.

This number terrified them—if their partner performed poorly, wouldn't they be expelled too?

"Mashima-sensei, you mentioned pairings would be based on quiz results, but how exactly will the pairing work?" Katsuragi asked.

"The rule is simple. The highest scorer will pair with the lowest, the second highest with the second lowest, and so on." Mashima explained the details calmly.

Even if he hadn't, Class A would've figured it out eventually given their capabilities.

Hearing this, weaker students immediately relaxed, while those with mid grades darkened their expressions.

Chapter 325: One Hundred Points in Debt

In truth, this was just the beginning.

Given Class A's overall academic level, passing this special exam through mere paired testing would be relatively easy.

Moreover, being a special exam, there would likely be changes to their Class Points.

"For this final exam, you students will be responsible for creating the test papers yourselves. All the questions must be conceived and formulated by you. The school will only handle the printing and review before distributing the exam to one class other than Class A."

"We create the questions, then give them to another class?"

"Exactly as it sounds. You can use the exam to attack other classes while also being targeted by them. The school will then compare the total scores of both classes to determine the winner."

"Do we have to face all three classes?"

"No, you can nominate one class. If they accept your nomination, you become the attacking side. Conversely, you can also accept a nomination from another class, but you can only receive one attack."

"What if the nominated class refuses?"

"You'll have to nominate another class or wait for another class to nominate you."

"What if multiple classes nominate the same class?"

"If two or more classes nominate the same class simultaneously, you can either draw lots or let the nominated class decide whose challenge to accept."

"What's the reward for winning?"

"You can take 50 Class Points from the opposing class, and vice versa."

...

During today's routine class meeting, Mashima answered most of the students' questions, thoroughly explaining the upcoming paired exam.

Specifically, Class A not only had to ensure no one was expelled during the exam but also had to attack another class by nominating them and creating their own questions.

The final outcome would be determined by comparing the total scores of both sides.

Therefore, if they adopted the mindset that avoiding expulsion was enough, they would lose the exam due to negligence and forfeit 50 Class Points.

In theory, this special exam could yield 100 Class Points.

For example, Class A could nominate one class while also accepting a nomination from another, effectively engaging in two battles.

Of course, they could also mutually nominate each other, attacking and defending simultaneously, with the winner seizing 100 Class Points from the opponent.

In the event of a tie, the Class Points would remain unchanged.

"Since we're making the questions, why not come up with some disgusting ones?" Totsuka Yahiko said optimistically.

"If no one can answer them, they'll lose quickly!"

"Your optimism is commendable, but the school will review your questions. Any that go beyond the prescribed syllabus will be invalid. If you fail to revise them before the exam, the school will provide replacement questions instead."

Mashima Tomonari calmly dismissed Totsuka Yahiko's suggestion.

If he could think of it, so could the school.

Totsuka Yahiko scratched his head and complained, "This is so troublesome. We have to make the questions and take the exam. Who knows what kind of questions they'll come up with."

"Actually, it's the opposite, Yahiko," Katsuragi interjected. "Precisely because students are creating the questions, only those with strong academic abilities will do so, and their level won't be much higher than ours."

It wasn't just a matter of ability but also professionalism.

Students who were only used to answering questions suddenly becoming question-makers wouldn't be able to shift their mindset and approach quickly enough, making them less professional than official exam creators.

Although Mashima Tomonari indicated that there were no restrictions on the questions—they could refer to online sources or seek help from others.

"Judging by academic ability, only Class B can be our enemy," Shinji Matoba pondered for a moment.

"Right now, Class D has no points, so we can only nominate two classes. Comparatively, I think targeting Class C would be a safer bet."

"Class C seems full of delinquents; their academic ability must be terrible," someone in the class whispered.

The suggestion sounded quite appealing to them.

"But what if there's a nomination conflict?" someone else raised a concern.

"If Class B or Class D also nominates Class C, we might not succeed."

"I think Class B will definitely nominate us. Class C and Class D aren't as strong academically—they wouldn't dare."

"Given Class D's level, if they nominate us or Class B, it'd practically be a suicidal move. They'd most likely pick Class C."

"The key is, who would Class C nominate? Class D's trash has no points right now—no one would bother nominating them."

"Right. What if we nominate Class C, and Class C nominates us in return? Then it becomes an offensive and defensive battle. Even if we win, we'd only get 50 points."

"Is there a scenario where Class B nominates us, we nominate Class C, and Class C nominates Class B?"

"What about Class D?"

"..."

The class discussion grew heated.

Kaoru Mitoma noticed for the first time that many usually silent students were now engaging in class affairs.

Perhaps the sports festival had given them a slight sense of urgency.

"Mashima-sensei, if we nominate Class D and win, but Class D has no points to pay, what happens?"

Katsuragi Kouhei raised his hand to ask Mashima.

His question was one that most students were concerned about.

At this moment, Class D was in the most awkward position.

The entire Class A believed there was no need to nominate Class D—in fact, they were even afraid Class D might nominate them.

After all, Class D had nothing to lose, and even if they won, there'd be no benefit.

Mashima Tomonari remained silent for a long time.

Class D had broken the school's records at the start of the term, and now they were doing it again.

"The school has decided to make an exception. If you defeat Class D, they will owe you 50 points. Once they are capable of repaying, the points will be transferred to you."

Indeed, ANHS originally didn't allow negative points.

But to proceed with the exam normally, the school had to take special measures.

If Class D lost in this special exam, they could end up owing 100 points.

In an instant, the expressions of Class A's students turned peculiar.

Kaoru felt a pang of guilt.

"Trash will always be trash."

Someone muttered the words, but no one paid much attention.

After all, Class A already looked down on Class D.

"Even though Class D is an easy target, let's keep them as the last priority for nomination."

Shinji Matoba's proposal gained unanimous approval from most students.

To be honest, they seriously doubted whether Class D would ever be able to repay the points.

Mashima Tomonari scanned the classroom, feeling somewhat surprised.

It seemed the failure in the sports festival hadn't demoralized Class A but instead ignited their competitive spirit.

"Discuss among yourselves. You must inform me of the nominated class one day before the exam. Otherwise, the school will randomly assign one for you."

With that, Mashima Tomonari left the classroom, leaving the students to their discussion.

Chapter 326: Class A's Strategy

The discussion didn't last long, and a preliminary consensus was quickly reached.

The safest approach was to nominate Class C and accept nominations from any class except D, maximizing Class A's benefits.

Ideally, mutual nomination with Class C could settle the outcome in one decisive move.

However, the problem was ensuring the process would go smoothly.

"There's no need to worry about Class C," Sakayanagi Arisu's voice, clear as a spring, cut through the murmurs just as things seemed settled.

"Class C has 522 points, while Class B has 966. Compared to the former, Class B is clearly closer to us. I don't understand your reasoning."

"If we can take 100 points from Class C, it would still put us 100 points ahead of Class B. What's so hard to understand?" Shinji Matoba frowned slightly.

He grasped Sakayanagi's point, but targeting Class C also meant indirectly targeting Class B.

"In that case, Class B would only have Class D as their opponent. Do you think Class B would lose to Class D, Matoba-kun?" Sakayanagi's tone was calm, her expression serene.

Shinji Matoba hesitated.

Of course, he didn't believe Class B would lose to Class D, but Class D—

"What does it matter? Class D's trash has no points to begin with. Even if Class B wins, it's meaningless," Totsuka Yahiko said dismissively, echoing the thoughts of Matoba and many others.

"Mashima-sensei mentioned that Class D is allowed to go into debt, meaning they could very well owe Class B 100 points," Sakayanagi sighed softly.

"In that scenario, how are we any different from Class B?"

The only difference was that Class A would have already gained 100 points, while Class B hadn't yet.

But in reality, the net increase for both classes would be the same.

In other words, the gap between Class A and Class B wouldn't change at all.

Soon, some students in the class realized this.

"Sakayanagi-san, do you really think Class D can repay 100 points?"

"Class D started the term with zero points, but by summer break, they'd already climbed out of that hole."

"Is it possible for Class D to clear their debt before the end of the academic year?"

"Heh, I believe they have the ability to repay it."

Katsuragi Kouhei took a deep breath.

Privately, he favored Shinji Matoba's idea because it was a stable strategy—Class C's academic ability couldn't surpass Class A's.

"I think both Sakayanagi-san and Matoba-kun's ideas have merit. First, Matoba-kun's plan: nominating Class C benefits us, but our only real rival is Class B. This approach doesn't effectively weaken Class B and might leave the actual gap unchanged."

Katsuragi acknowledged Matoba's reasoning before gradually outlining Sakayanagi's concerns, prompting nods of agreement from the students present.

"However, there's one more point. If Class B wants to surpass us, they'll also consider this. Nominating Class D obviously won't help them catch up." Katsuragi Kouhei suddenly shifted his tone.

"Assuming Class B doesn't pursue stability, they might very well nominate us."

Yes, that was indeed one possibility.

Class B's academic abilities were also superior to Classes C and D. No matter whose nomination they accepted, Class B would have an advantage. In that case, why not take a bold gamble?

By nominating Class A while accepting nominations from either Class C or D, even if Class B lost to Class A, they could still recover their losses from Classes C and D, minimizing the overall impact.

If Class B managed to defeat Class A, they would not only gain 100 points but also cause Class A to lose 50 points, effectively narrowing the gap by 150 points.

Sakayanagi Arisu glanced around the classroom and chuckled softly.

"I see. In Katsuragi-kun's view, should we nominate Class C and accept Class B's nomination?"

Assuming Class B would nominate Class A, the more stable approach for Class A wasn't to counter-nominate Class B and engage in direct competition but to promptly nominate Class C instead.

The reasoning behind this was the same as Class B's.

"This is the safest approach at the moment. Of course, I can't guarantee that both Class B and Class C will cooperate as we hope," Katsuragi replied calmly.

Sakayanagi Arisu scanned the room.

Many seemed swayed by his argument.

Although the failure in the sports festival was still fresh, the class's seemingly lively atmosphere masked underlying anxiety—anxiety about whether they would fail again in the next special exam, anxiety about whether Class A would be overtaken.

For them, what they needed now wasn't risk-taking but stability—a strategy to ensure Class A remained unbeatable.

It was out of this concern that Shinji Matoba had proposed his earlier plan.

Now, Katsuragi Kouhei's suggestion struck a balance between Matoba's approach and hers—neither too risky nor too conservative.

"I understand. I hope reality aligns with your expectations," Sakayanagi Arisu smiled.

Though she said nothing more, her expression made it clear: she would undoubtedly nominate Class B.

Seeing no opposition from her, Katsuragi Kouhei breathed a sigh of relief.

If they had argued, even with Class A's advantages, they might have wasted precious time and potentially lost.

But something felt off.

Wasn't she trying to seize control of the discussion?

However, Sakayanagi Arisu soon provided the answer.

"Setting nominations aside, the urgent matters are pairing partners for the exam and preparing the test papers," the girl maintained her smile.

"Though I don't believe any of our classmates will face expulsion, striving for higher scores is always preferable."

Hashimoto Masayoshi spoke up as if he'd anticipated this.

"Regarding pairings, Mashima-sensei already explained—top-performing students will be paired with weaker ones. I don't foresee any issues. We should prepare for the exam as usual."

Katsuragi sensed trouble.

His opponent clearly knew where her strengths lay and had deliberately let go of the earlier topic.

"Therefore, we must now focus on one important task—I believe you all know what it is," Sakayanagi Arisu said softly.

"Regarding the exam paper preparation, I think it would be best handled by students with high academic abilities, such as the top ten in our class."

The top ten in the class—unsurprisingly, Katsuragi let out a sigh.

He had no reason to oppose this suggestion.

Hashimoto Masayoshi added, "There are eight subjects for the exam, fifty questions each, totaling four hundred. That works out to forty questions per person."

"With one month left until finals, this workload shouldn't be a problem, right?" Sakayanagi glanced at the other students—more precisely, at the top ten.

The rest had no chance to interject.

"We have no choice but to proceed this way," Katsuragi Kouhei quickly agreed with Sakayanagi's proposal.

After all, she was the top-ranked student in their class, consistently scoring near-perfect marks in every exam, while his own grades fluctuated between second and third place.

Thus, Sakayanagi Arisu had to take the lead in drafting the exam questions—her academic prowess was unmatched in Class A.

Aside from Sakayanagi and Katsuragi, the top ten included Kaoru, Hashimoto Masayoshi, Sanada, Morishita Ai, and others.

From then on, Class A would form an exam preparation committee consisting of these students, responsible for setting the test papers.

Additionally, to maximize their overall scores, supplementary tutoring couldn't be neglected.

Therefore, Sakayanagi proposed that high-achieving students guide their assigned partners while also providing regular tutoring for their classmates.

Chapter 327: Kamuro, You Don't Need Me Anymore

There wasn't much to debate about Class A's decision.

Sakayanagi wanted to target Class B, while Katsuragi preferred a more cautious approach.

Most students leaned toward the latter.

Thus, the only area where Sakayanagi could exert her influence was in designing the exam.

Kaoru had no objections to her arrangements.

After everyone formed a small group chat, today's homeroom meeting came to an end.

Although he had once intimidated Kamuro, her grades had actually improved significantly—from the lower-middle range to solidly mid-tier, even breaking into the top fifteen.

Perhaps it was due to the tutoring, or perhaps she had simply been working hard all along.

After class, as Kaoru was about to leave, Kamuro dryly asked from beside him.

"Why didn't you say anything earlier?"

"What was I supposed to say?" Kaoru gave her a puzzled look as she pretended to pack her bag.

"Weren't you always making sarcastic remarks about my poor grades before?" Kamuro had finally managed to turn things around in the midterms and had been anticipating his usual taunts—only to be met with silence, which left her inexplicably frustrated.

"The past is the past, and the present is the present. I can't keep comparing the old you to the current you forever, can I?" Kaoru declared righteously.

"Those words sound especially infuriating coming from you," Masumi retorted, slinging her bag over her shoulder. Her skirt flared as she turned toward the classroom door.

"For you, this must be a relief—finally getting rid of a burden like me."

The girl's legs were straight and slender, though not as long as Kiryūin, they were still impressive.

The moment she turned around, one's gaze would inevitably be drawn to her perky little ass.

The slight upward curve pressed against her skirt, and as she walked, it almost felt like one could catch a glimpse of what lay beneath.

In reality, nothing could be seen, but that very illusion was what made it so captivating, leaving room for the imagination.

"I never thought of it that way. In fact, I'm quite happy to have taught you like this. It shows that Kamuro-san isn't stupid at all," Kaoru said, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

"If you were to abandon me right after learning from me, I'd probably die of heartbreak."

"Stop spouting nonsense," Kamuro Masumi retorted as she walked out of the classroom, seemingly unwilling to engage with him further.

From behind, Kaoru noticed several girls greeting her, even asking for her contact information, leaving her visibly bewildered.

A while later, after Masumi had shaken them off, Kaoru caught up to her.

"Your popularity has really shot up."

"If I said I have no idea why, would you believe me?"

"Of course."

"...At the time, I felt like I had endless energy, but by the next day, it was gone. Then Sakayanagi had me run again, and the results were nowhere near as good as during the race."

"A miracle. Your body's still developing—occasional bursts like that are normal."

"..."

Masumi didn't want to waste time on this topic, but soon, someone else joined the conversation.

"Mitoma-kun, are you familiar with these things?" Sakayanagi Arisu tapped her cane as she hurried to keep up with the two.

"I'm quite worried about Masumi. If something were to happen to her health, I can't even imagine life without her."

The corner of Masumi's mouth twitched.

More like losing a convenient tool would be troublesome, right?

"Compared to her, your health is the bigger concern, isn't it?" Kaoru slowed his pace.

The girl's legs looked far too thin, her white garter socks giving off a frail, almost pallid glow under the sunlight.

Moreover, she was struggling to keep up with Kaoru and Masumi, making it seem like she might collapse at any moment.

"Fufufu, Mitoma-kun is always worrying about my health. But please, don't trouble yourself over such a minor issue," Sakayanagi said with a smile, noticing his concern.

Masumi hadn't planned on walking back with Kaoru, but now that Sakayanagi had forced her way into the conversation, she reluctantly slowed down as well.

"I retested Kamuro-san physical condition and found that no matter what we tried, she couldn't match her performance from race day. It's quite strange," Sakayanagi mused.

"Earlier, Mitoma-kun suggested it might be due to the body's potential for bursts of energy during adolescence?"

"After all, the body's potential hasn't been fully developed yet. Some students with athletic talents even have physiques different from ordinary people." Kaoru spouted nonsense without batting an eye.

Using props openly like this was bound to raise suspicions.

"Is that so?" Sakayanagi Arisu smiled without refuting his lies, then shifted the topic to today's class meeting.

"Who do you think we should pick?"

"Anyone will do. We're Class A—they're the challengers." Kaoru didn't seem to care.

He had never been interested in class affairs.

If not for Sakayanagi, he wouldn't have supported Katsuragi.

"Then let me rephrase the question. Who would Mitoma-kun prefer to nominate Class A?"

Nomination meant actively attacking the other party—the attacking side would create the exam, while the defending side would answer it.

From this perspective, nominating a class with higher academic ability would likely result in defeat.

No matter how you looked at it, Class B was the most likely to nominate Class A.

Classes C and D were unlikely to do so.

Although the school had never disclosed the specific details of each class—such as individual grades—other classes couldn't see them.

"Class B." Kaoru Mitoma recalled what he had said a few days ago.

"If it's any class other than Class B, it's either a suicidal attack or they're fully confident. The former would be more than welcome, but the latter might lead to us losing the exam."

Kamuro Masumi grew nervous.

She stole a glance at Kaoru—was he deliberately trying to scare her with those words?

"I see. Understood." Sakayanagi Arisu nodded. "I've been worried about that too. Since we don't know the specifics of other classes, I think it's best to gather some information."

As she spoke, she suddenly stopped walking.

Kaoru turned back in confusion, just in time to see her smile faintly.

"If you have time, I'd like you to keep an eye on Class B."

A gentle breeze swept by as Sakayanagi Arisu pressed down on her beret.

Her fair arm gleamed brilliantly under the sunlight.

A faint mist seemed to shimmer in her eyes—her smile delicate and fragile, yet as dangerous as quicksand.

"Kamuro-san, you'll be with me for the time being."

"Huh?"

"I'll be responsible for your review."

"W-wait, why are you suddenly so concerned about me?"

"Fufufu, is there anything wrong with that?"

"..."

Kaoru watched as Sakayanagi led Kamuro away.

The girl's back was tinged with gold, likely from the scattered remnants of the evening sun.

Chapter 328: The Traditional Date Routine

Dating within the school grounds made it hard to avoid the eyes of classmates.

No matter how vast the campus was, you'd inevitably run into a student or two along the way.

Even so, the traditional dating routine had to be followed—shopping, watching a movie, and dining.

If ANHS had an amusement park or aquarium, Kaoru would have added them to today's itinerary.

It was late October.

The autumn sky was clear, and the morning sun's rays spilled through thin clouds, streaking across the azure horizon before scattering onto the sidewalks.

The tangled shadows of trees swayed in the breeze, and the cool wind brushed against their faces.

Ichinose Honami stood beneath the tree, wearing a pale off-shoulder dress that revealed the delicate curve of her collarbone.

Her snow-white, tender arms peeked out from the sleeves—a departure from her usual style, giving her an air of innocent charm today, as if even her hair radiated a dazzling glow.

She wasn't wearing stockings, and only a small section of her fair, slender calves showed beneath the long hem of her dress.

Her feet clad in short socks, were tucked inside black leather flats.

Seeming slightly nervous, Ichinose kept glancing left and right.

Whenever she met a passerby's gaze, she would appear flustered, touching her ears as if adjusting her hair.

"Sorry I'm late," Kaoru said as he approached her.

In truth, she had arrived an hour early, but it still felt wrong to keep a girl waiting.

Ichinose Honami was startled to see him appear before her, but soon relaxed.

"It's fine. If I came out too late, I might run into Chihiro-chan and the others."

With a height difference of about twenty centimeters, Kaoru slightly lowered his gaze and caught sight of the girl's chest, barely concealed beneath her dress, puffing it up like cotton candy—tempting enough to make one want a taste.

She too tilted her head up, exposing her fair neck fully to Kaoru's view.

The delicate hollow of her collarbone gleamed with a smooth, creamy sheen, almost like custard.

A faint, sweet fragrance drifted into Kaoru's senses.

Clearly, she had taken a shower before heading out, now smelling as delightful as strawberry ice cream on a summer day.

"You look adorable today. Honestly, I didn't expect Honami to pull off this style so well."

At Kaoru's words, Ichinose blushed slightly.

In truth, she had spent over an hour getting ready—after all, this was their date.

"Let's go."

With a tone that was eighty percent gentle and twenty percent firm, Kaoru took Ichinose's hand.

The more he understood her feelings, the more he couldn't let her anticipation go to waste.

Ichinose bit her lip, her peripheral vision catching the glances of a few students nearby.

Her heart raced as if two fawns were wrestling inside her chest.

Her face warmed, but she didn't resist Kaoru's gesture.

Instead, she obediently followed behind him.

In truth, when Kaoru had first mentioned the date, she had been flustered beyond belief.

She could already picture the scene—even though they had left early to avoid most students, walking side by side like this still drew plenty of attention.

It almost felt like... they were boldly declaring their relationship.

Ichinose's cheeks burned, yet a hint of worry lingered in her heart.

She had assumed Kaoru would invite her to his room for a stay-at-home date, where they could simply chat in private.

But here he was, holding her hand and walking down the street with effortless ease.

The Keyaki Mall, thanks to the vast campus of Advanced Nurturing High School, rivaled some university districts in size.

If not for the lack of eccentric shops, Kaoru might have mistaken it for Ikebukuro.

Aside from the stores lining the walkways, the largest establishment was the central superstore, housing a variety of department goods and specialty shops.

At this hour, the mall had just opened, with only a few students browsing and staff bustling about.

The real crowd wouldn't arrive until noon.

Since this was a date, Kaoru made sure to give Ichinose the full experience.

They played games at the arcade, where he won her a plush caterpillar, and sampled various snacks from the food stalls.

He had considered feeding each other, but seeing how nervous she was, he quickly abandoned the idea.

Treating her like a princess, he kept a watchful eye on her safety, initiated conversations during waits, and bought everything that caught her interest—attending to her every need with meticulous care.

By noon, as more students began filling the mall, Kaoru led her to the cinema.

They picked a classic romance film and bought a bucket of popcorn to share.

The dim lighting and dark atmosphere were punctuated by the flickering images on the giant screen, casting their glow onto the girl sitting beside him, illuminating her delicate face.

The moment her clear eyes overlapped with the light, it was as if fireflies were dancing in the air.

"It feels like it was the same before," Ichinose murmured softly.

"This time, it's just the two of us," Kaoru tightened his grip on her small hand.

In many romantic tales, watching a movie is a rite of passage for every couple—holding hands in the dark, wrapping an arm around shoulders, stealing kisses, or even getting carried away by passionate scenes.

Clearly, Ichinose had thought of these things too.

Her face flushed slightly as she hugged the plush caterpillar in her arms tighter.

Wasn't this what dates were supposed to be about?

Surprisingly, Kaoru did nothing of the sort afterward.

He simply watched the movie quietly, occasionally grabbing a handful of popcorn to munch on.

The plot was cliché—the protagonists were about to graduate high school, and if they didn't confess their feelings now, they'd never get another chance.

Revolving around how to confess and make their feelings known, the male and female leads engaged in a battle of wits, testing each other's reactions, both growing increasingly anxious.

Ichinose stole a glance at Kaoru.

His outfit wasn't particularly flashy—just a light-colored T-shirt and casual pants—neither too eye-catching nor too dull.

The problem was his strikingly handsome face, which had drawn the attention of many girls along the way, though he seemed completely oblivious.

Of course, Ichinose didn't consider herself shallow.

What she cared about wasn't Kaoru's looks, nor his exposed skin, his well-defined fingers, the faint hint of collarbone, the masculine Adam's apple, or his clean, sharp jawline.

Instead, she remembered the naughty things Kaoru had done to her.

How could someone with such an innocent appearance kneel and lick a girl's foot?

And today, he seemed like a completely different person.

Not that she disliked it, but it felt... strange.

Before Kaoru could make a move, Ichinose found herself lost in memories of all the things they'd shared.

"Honami," he suddenly called her name softly, his dark eyes turning toward her.

"W-what is it?" Ichinose clenched her fists unconsciously, her gaze uneasy as she looked at him.

On the screen, the movie happened to reach the scene where the male and female leads accidentally kissed.

Kaoru stared at the girl beside him—her moist tender lips, her trembling eyelashes that seemed ready to flutter shut at any moment, even the way she leaned forward slightly, as if anticipating something.

So, Kaoru stuffed a piece of popcorn into her mouth, his fingertips now coated with her saliva.

"This popcorn tastes pretty good."

With that, he casually ate another piece right in front of her, completely unfazed.

Chapter 329: Are You Cheating on Me?

After the movie ended, Kaoru didn't hold Ichinose's hand as they walked out, leaving her visibly pouting.

"Are you mad?" Kaoru asked, clearly oblivious.

"You were teasing me on purpose. That was too much." Ichinose puffed her cheeks in displeasure, recalling how he'd eaten the popcorn without hesitation—popcorn that had touched her lips.

Her face burned at the memory.

"But didn't you end up enjoying it too?" Kaoru was referring to her eating the popcorn.

"Shut up." Ichinose Honami felt embarrassed.

Truthfully, she hadn't intended to do anything bad—she was just so accustomed to Kaoru playing tricks on her that she couldn't help wanting to play along this time.

Who knew he only wanted to feed her? It had made her so nervous.

However, Ichinose Honami didn't stay upset for long.

As the two walked out of the cinema, the crowded mall made her tense up again.

"Let me see your hand," Kaoru suddenly said to her.

Ichinose Honami instinctively extended her hand, only for Kaoru to immediately grasp it, holding it gently without any intention of letting go—or even actually looking at it.

Realization dawned on her a little late.

"W-what are you doing?" she whispered, her cheeks flushing.

"Someone might see. Let go, quick."

The girl's small hand was soft, her fair and delicate skin flawless and smooth like naturally polished jade, its texture so fine it inspired tenderness.

"It doesn't matter anymore. Suppressing our feelings will only strain our relationship," Kaoru murmured.

"No one can go back to the past. The only thing we can do is start over."

Ichinose Honami's expression grew complicated, her lips pressing together.

"Why bring this up all of a sudden? I'm not as bothered as you think."

"Because our relationship is more twisted than that of a normal couple, and I..." Kaoru hesitated.

He wasn't sure how Ichinose would react to his thoughts.

Based on their past interactions, she hated it when he got involved with other girls.

"Are you trying to talk about Mako-chan?" Ichinose Honami spoke up first.

Unbeknownst to Kaoru, she had actually talked with Amikura Mako many times—she had always known about Mako's feelings.

Kaoru was stunned for a moment before smiling.

"These topics aren't suited for today's date. Let's go eat."

The conversation was cut short, and Ichinose Honami didn't push further.

Instead, she recalled a recent scene—the figures of Sakayanagi Arisu and Amikura Mako flashing through her mind.

The location was a quiet Western restaurant.

Kaoru ordered two servings of Wellington steak, and since they were underage, the waiter brought them juice instead of alcohol.

After eating, the food felt rather ordinary—perhaps the restaurant didn't have a particularly skilled chef, nor did they prepare high-quality ingredients.

After all, ANHS spending power wasn't especially high.

For dessert, they were served two different flavors of ice cream—a deliberate arrangement by Kaoru.

"Want to try mine?" Kaoru turned his ice cream toward Ichinose Honami.

"I took a bite—it's really good."

Even though they had kissed multiple times, Ichinose Honami still blushed slightly.

Looking at the ice cream he offered, along with the spoon he had used—it might even carry his taste.

"You've been acting weird today," she remarked, scooping a bite and finding it overwhelmingly sweet.

"That's what dates are for—to let you experience a different side of me," Kaoru paused, "or rather, I want to see a different side of you too."

Ichinose Honami felt a bit annoyed.

To be honest, she sometimes really wondered if this guy was doing it on purpose—often managing to say embarrassingly sweet things with such a straight face.

"Since that's the case, please try my flavor too." She scooped a spoonful from her own ice cream and brought it to Mitoma Kaoru's mouth.

"Open up, Boyfriend-san."

Kaoru obediently ate the ice cream from her spoon, his expression unchanged, which only made her feel a little more self-conscious.

"It's like feeding a puppy."

"Demoting me from Boyfriend-san to a dog is way too harsh."

"It's just a metaphor, and I'm still mad."

"Then let me feed you too."

"Mmm~"

As Kaoru fed her a bite, he found the way she licked her lips adorable and couldn't resist taking a few photos with his phone.

"Why are you taking pictures of me?!" Ichinose Honami hurriedly tried to cover her pretty face.

She hadn't put on any special makeup today—for her, applying makeup was a bit difficult.

"I'm really happy to be on a date with you today. I hope we can keep dating in the future, but before that, let me save some precious memories."

Kaoru didn't see anything wrong with it.

Taking pictures of his girlfriend was perfectly natural.

"At least warn me first..." Ichinose Honami murmured softly before picking up her own phone and snapping a few photos of Mitoma Kaoru.

"So this is what dating feels like?"

"Are you happy?" Kaoru asked.

"A little serious, a little new," Ichinose Honami answered honestly.

"It feels kind of unbelievable that I actually have a boyfriend now."

Before Kaoru could respond, she pressed her lips together and smiled faintly.

"But... I understand your feelings, Kaoru. You want to give me a normal relationship, right?"

Sometimes, Kaoru suspected that they too possessed some form of Emotion Perception—or perhaps a superhuman radar—always able to see through his intentions so quickly.

"Actually, your judgment about me isn't wrong. Someone like me is inherently twisted. And you wanting to correct my way of thinking isn't wrong either. But I know my own nature very well." Kaoru's voice turned distant.

"Even now, I don't think what I did to you back then was wrong in the slightest."

Ichinose Honami studied him for a moment before suddenly asking.

"Why do you always say such airy things so casually?"

"Does it make you unhappy?" Kaoru asked.

"I know exactly what kind of person my boyfriend is, so I don't mind these things. And... doing a few bad things... I don't dislike it either..." Ichinose Honami's face flushed slightly, but her voice remained firm.

"Your true nature isn't something anyone could hate. On the contrary, once people understand you, no one would ever dislike you."

"No, I've actually kept quite a few things from you." Kaoru's mood grew complicated.

"Did you cheat on me?" Ichinose Honami asked calmly.

Kaoru nearly jumped in surprise before realizing—she had always remained rational about him, perceptive of his every move.

"In a certain sense... yes, I did cheat."

After saying this, he watched the silent girl before him.

Unlike Kushida Kikyo or Sakayanagi Arisu, there was a very real chance that she genuinely cared about this kind of thing.

Chapter 330: The Official and the side chick

Ichinose Honami had a strong sense of morality.

The fact that she remained so haunted by the theft incident from middle school precisely proved this point.

It was precisely because of this that she had made the decision back then to correct Kaoru rather than compromise or resist—though looking back now, it was clear she knew nothing about romance, even appearing somewhat naive and inexperienced.

However, Kaoru was well aware that she was the least likely girl to ever accept a harem.

"Who is the other woman?" Ichinose Honami asked, just as expected.

Though he wasn't sure if others could remain calm when faced with such a question, Kaoru felt little panic.

Instead, he replied, "I've been thinking about something these past few days. Possessiveness is a manifestation of love, but love isn't necessarily possessiveness. I know what we have can't really be called affection yet—"

"No, it is affection," Ichinose interrupted him. "Because it is affection, I told you I would change your womanizing habits, as well as your tendency to resort to underhanded methods."

Kaoru froze for a moment, his expression turning odd.

Was this a confession?

"I already know about you and Mako-chan."

"Did she say something to you?"

"Mako-chan is troubled. She doesn't know if she likes you, nor does she know if she still has feelings for that senpai."

"Sorry, I don't understand emotions at all."

"Whenever Kaoru lies, his eyes stare straight ahead, and his face becomes completely expressionless."

"..."

Kaoru instinctively touched his face.

Was his face really that obvious?

"But I know Kaoru is troubled right now too." Ichinose forced a faint smile.

"Forcing a carnivore to go vegetarian is just too much. The more you suppress it, the more tangled things become."

"Making your first love turn out like this... I feel a little guilty." Kaoru didn't apologize, nor did he suggest breaking up—because right now, a breakup was impossible.

He would never let go of Ichinose Honami.

Ichinose shook her head.

"I never thought I'd have a boyfriend in the first place. I assumed I'd spend high school alone. Back then, when Chihiro-chan asked me what my standards for a boyfriend were, I thought for a long time but couldn't come up with anything. My mind was completely blank."

"They'll probably find out today, to some extent." Kaoru no longer had any intention of keeping it hidden.

Continuing to hide things would only be irresponsible toward Ichinose.

"Including the other woman?" Ichinose murmured. "I don't think it's Sakayanagi-san. Even though she seems close to you, she doesn't strike me as the type to settle for being second to anyone. Then there's Kamuro-san, Kushida-san, Asahina-senpai..."

"Why is Asahina-senpai's name in there?" Kaoru couldn't help but tense up.

"Because the way she looks at you is strange," Ichinose Honami added.

"Plus, with Tachibana-senpai, she might not even realize her own feelings toward you."

"Tachibana-senpai probably just enjoys teasing me," Kaoru offered a reasonable guess.

"Girls don't provoke someone for no reason." Ichinose Honami counted on her fingers.

"Adding it up, my boyfriend is really something, managing to attract so many girls."

In reality, there might be even more, but Kaoru kept that thought to himself.

"Are you angry?"

"Is there any reason I shouldn't be?"

"Because even if you're angry, I won't break up with you, Honami. So I'll just have to ask you to keep being angry."

"How domineering." Ichinose Honami leaned slightly forward, locking eyes with Kaoru.

"But, when you already have me, why do you still act like this?"

"Are you asking me to choose?" Kaoru pondered.

"I want to understand all of you better. I want to know your joys and sorrows. I want to be with all of you. If I had to give up any one of you, I wouldn't be satisfied."

"From that statement alone, you're a complete scoundrel and narcissist." Ichinose Honami wasn't sure how to feel.

She had already anticipated this outcome, but it still left her heart unsettled.

"But I don't have any right to be angry. It's not like I've done anything about it."

Just dealing with Amikura Mako's situation had left her feeling helpless.

Should she give up Kaoru and let Amikura Mako take her place?

Or should she continue trying to dissuade Amikura Mako?

"If you'd prefer, I can pretend otherwise." Kaoru pointed at her bowl.

"Your ice cream is melting. It'll be wasted if you don't eat it soon."

"Don't do that. Our relationship isn't normal to begin with—it could never be like an ordinary romance." Ichinose Honami lowered her voice.

"Besides, I've already gotten used to you doing bad things."

Truthfully, every guy does bad things to their girlfriend.

Kaoru scooped a spoonful of ice cream, savoring the cold, sweet sensation melting on his tongue.

"By the way, have you been dealing with something lately?"

Ichinose Honami's expression stiffened slightly as she feigned confusion.

"No, why do you ask?"

"You act unnatural when you lie." Kaoru pointed out. "Plus, your fingers keep tracing circles on the table."

Ichinose Honami instinctively glanced at her fingers.

Had she been drawing circles?

Only when she noticed the spoon in her hand did she realize—Kaoru had tricked her.

"Come on, what's wrong?" Kaoru frowned.

At first, he thought she was upset about the earlier threat, but that wasn't it.

Then she brought up the topic of infidelity, but that wasn't it either.

Honestly, he couldn't figure out what was troubling Ichinose Honami.

[Ichinose Honami: Worried, distressed, guilty, afraid, conflicted.]

[Recommend immediate reassurance to boost her confidence and resolve.]

Unaware that her emotions were laid bare before Kaoru, she shook her head softly.

"It's just some trouble in class. You don't need to worry about me, Kaoru."

"Is it about Amikura?" Kaoru asked.

Ichinose Honami shot him a glare.

He was bringing this up again, and she had no idea how to handle it.

"Kaoru, what do you think of Mako-chan?" Since they were already on the topic, she decided to ask outright.

"She's cute. I have a pretty good impression of her." Kaoru recalled what Amikura Mako had said to him.

Though it might have sounded a little self-absorbed, he could tell she was a girl with a good sense of boundaries.

Ichinose suddenly felt like the odd one out, her irritation growing.

Maybe she really shouldn't have gotten involved in the first place.

But wouldn't that just play right into Sakayanagi Arisu's hands?

...

As they stepped out of the restaurant, both were lost in their own thoughts.

Kaoru glanced at the girl beside him but still couldn't figure out what was on her mind.

"Where should we go next?" Ichinose looked around the mall—upstairs was the entertainment area, while downstairs housed the department store and the exit.

"It's getting colder. Maybe we should buy some seasonal clothes." Kaoru, still in short sleeves, could already feel a slight chill.

"Sure!" Ichinose suddenly perked up.

She realized she had never bought Kaoru a gift before, and this was the perfect opportunity.

Just as they were about to head downstairs, they ran into Karuizawa Kei, who was chatting and laughing with a group of girls.

In that instant, Kaoru made a decision.

"Honami, maybe we should—"

"Yahooo!"

Sure enough, Karuizawa quickly noticed them and waved enthusiastically, a bright smile on her face.

"What a surprise! I didn't expect to run into Mitoma-kun and Ichinose-san here."

The girl waved, her eyes sparkling with delight.

It was the weekend, so she was in casual wear—a light-colored vest over a long-sleeved top, a white shirt tied at her waist, and a skirt that revealed smooth, pale thighs with a faint blush at her knees.

Her white scrunched socks rested atop little leather shoes, making her stand out even more.

Beside her were several other girls from Class D, all in casual outfits, clearly out for some fun.

"Good afternoon, Karuizawa-san, Matsushita-san, Mori-san..." Ichinose suppressed her fluster and forced a polite smile.

"Are you all out together?"

"Yeah! We heard there's a new place with really good food," Karuizawa replied cheerfully, her gaze flickering between the two.

Thankfully, they weren't holding hands—that would've been awkward.

"But, huh, where's Amikura-san and the others?"

Instead of directly asking why Ichinose was with Kaoru, she took a roundabout approach.

If Ichinose had snuck out without telling Amikura and the others, then her current relationship with Kaoru would be worth speculating about.

"I think they're still in the dorm," Ichinose answered with a light smile.

"It's the weekend, so they probably wanted to rest up before exams."

Kaoru added, "There's some minor student council business, so Ichinose and I were discussing it today."

Karuizawa's expression cleared as if she'd just figured something out, and she smiled naturally.

"Oh, I see! That explains why you're together. I almost thought you two were dating or something."

Although Kaoru had mentally prepared himself, he couldn't help but find it somewhat amusing how boldly she launched her attack—the jealousy was practically dripping from her words.

"Yabai, I thought the same thing. It really surprised me."

"But Mitoma-kun and Ichinose-san look really good together."

"It's such a shame they're not dating."

Listening to the voices around her, Karuizawa Kei narrowed her eyes.

So, they weren't planning to announce their relationship yet?

Thinking about it carefully, with the special exam about to begin, suddenly revealing that they were dating would inevitably cause some shock.

So, were they planning to let everyone get used to the idea gradually?

A faint sense of crisis crept into Karuizawa heart.

Kaoru and Ichinose Honami were progressing so quickly—what about her?

"Ahaha, you guys surprised me too." Ichinose also let out a sigh of relief.

She still didn't know how to face Amikura Mako, so she wanted to delay things a little.

But deep down, she already knew her place in Kaoru's heart.

That was enough.

Maybe it really was enough.